

Lisa MV draft 11:50

(August 8, 2015) —

DRAFT STATEMENT:

EPA is working closely with first responders and state and local officials to ensure the safety of citizens exposed to water contaminated by the spill. This unfortunate incident underscores the very reason EPA and the State of Colorado are focused on addressing the environmental risks at abandoned mine sites.

EPA Region 8 is also in close coordination with Region 6 and Region 9 and the states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Southern Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation. The Agency is taking the lead on efforts to contain the leak and flow from the mine is now controlled. EPA is sharing information as quickly as possible with the community as experts work to analyze any effects the spill may have on drinking water and public health. Regular updates on the response for the public and the media are scheduled throughout the weekend to keep everyone involved updated on the data being collected. The latest updates and information on the response are available at: <http://www2.epa.gov/region8/gold-king-mine-release-emergency-response>.

Background

On August 5, 2015, EPA was conducting an investigation of the Gold King Mine. The intent of the investigation was to create access to the mine, assess on-going water releases from the mine and assess the feasibility of further mine remediation. The plan was to excavate the loose material that had collapsed into the cave entry. During the excavation, the loose material gave way, opening the adit (mine tunnel) and spilling the water stored behind the collapsed material into Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River.

As a result, mine waste water was released into Cement Creek and the Animas River. The original volume estimate was one million gallons, but EPA Region 8 is working with the US Geological Survey (USGS) to recalculate the amount based on river gage readings.

The primary environmental concern remains the pulse of contaminated water containing sediment and metals flowing as an orange-colored discharge downstream through Durango, Colorado, and into New Mexico and Utah. The City of Durango relies on the Animas River as one of its water sources - the Animas source is off-line, and they are continuing to provide clean drinking water to the City. The river is also used for recreational purposes, including fishing and rafting. At the confluence of the Animas River and the San Juan River in New Mexico, there is a designated critical habitat for the Colorado Pike Minnow fish and the Razorback Sucker fish.

EPA is working closely with first responders and state and local officials to ensure the safety of citizens exposed to water contaminated by the spill. EPA Region 8 is also in close coordination with Region 6 and Region 9 and the states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Southern Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation. The Agency is taking the lead on efforts to contain the leak and flow from

the mine is now controlled. EPA is sharing information as quickly as possible with the community as experts work to analyze any effects the spill may have on drinking water and public health. Regular updates on the response for the public and the media are scheduled throughout the weekend to keep everyone involved updated on the data being collected. The latest updates and information on the response are available at:

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8/8/15 Update:

The water in Cement Creek and the Animas River in Silverton is no longer orange, and is clearing. The adit is still discharging currently but is being diverted and treated before it enters Cement Creek. Current sampling data is showing that the river is returning to pre-event conditions.

We expect conditions will continue to improve in the coming hours and days. The water in Cement Creek and the Animas River in Silverton is clearing. The adit is discharging lower flows into Cement Creek. EPA is rebuilding settling ponds to treat these flows – the upper pond will be completed by early afternoon, and the lower pond by COB or early tomorrow. EPA will treat the mine water diverted to the ponds with caustic soda and flocculent once the ponds are built.

Sampling Data and Results

EPA initiated a sampling effort on August 5. Surface water quality samples were collected from 7 locations. Two of these locations were on Cement Creek and 5 of these were on the Animas River in Colorado. These locations were selected based on the fact that an historical dataset already exists at these locations - baseline water quality data from the past 17 years has been obtained - and they will serve as good indicators of conditions before, during and after the event. The baseline data was compared with the new water quality data, resulting from samples collected over two days (August 5-6).

The trends over time and location represent the movement of the contamination and the return of the Animas River to conditions before the event. It is believed that subsequent data collection activities and results in these locations and in additional downstream locations will demonstrate an increase in metals concentrations followed by a decrease to baseline.

pH (a measure of acidity) was also measured. Except for locations within Cement Creek, generally, pH levels were measured before the arrival of the contaminant plume and found to range between 6.5 and 7.6. When the contaminated water from the mine release passed a sampling location, the pH lowered (indicating more acid) to approximately 4.8 (below Silverton). A pH of 4.5 is consistent with the pH of a liquid like black coffee. Later, however, in locations down river, the pH began to return to pre-incident levels. Water acidity levels in the Animas above Cement Creek have been consistent over the past two days at approximately 6.4 to 6.8. For reference, the pH of saliva is roughly 6 and the pH of pure water is 7. The acidity level in Cement Creek has remained low at 3.74 since the mine release. Tomato juice and

apples also have a pH of approximately 3.74. While this reference information is relevant to skin exposure, the evaluation of impacts of these pH levels on fish and other aquatic life is ongoing.

Cooperating Agencies

EPA Region 8 is coordinating the incident with EPA Regions 6 and 9, the States of Colorado and New Mexico, and the Navajo Nation and Southern Ute Tribes.

EPA Region 8 is coordinating with ATSDR in response to public health concerns/questions associated with the mine waste plume. ATSDR has been in communication with local health officials at San Juan County Basin Health Department in Colorado. Public health questions/concerns should be directed to Chris Poulet, ATSDR/R8 at 303-312-7013.

The Colorado Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office is monitoring effects on wildlife and aquatic life in the affected area.

The La Plata County Sheriff issued an order closing the Animas River to all watercraft from the north County line (San Juan County, Colorado) to the south County line (at the Colorado/New Mexico State line) until further notice. Furthermore, all such watercraft must be removed from the Animas River within the locations cited above. The decision was made after consultation with the EPA, CDPHE, the San Juan Basin Health Department, and representatives of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe. The Order will remain in effect until it is determined that the river is safe.

EPA Region 8 has contacted the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Department of Interior about the incident, and is working with the US Geological Service on water flow data in Cement Creek and the Animas River.

EPA Region 9 has contacted the Bureau of Indian Affairs regarding potential impacts to the Navajo Nation.